

2/22/23 Wednesday

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Hypersonic Missiles & Modernization: Putin Vows to Strengthen Russia's Nuclear Triad
By - Fantine Gardinier

During an address on Defender of the Fatherland Day, Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged to continue strengthening the country's strategic missile systems, including the development of hypersonic weapons.

"We will pay increased attention, as before, to strengthening the nuclear triad," Putin told an audience of World War II veterans on Thursday, referring to the country's three methods of attacking with nuclear weapons: land-based ballistic missile, submarine-based ballistic missile, and nuclear bomber.

According to the Russian leader, this will include placing on the first RS-28 Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launchers on combat duty, pushing forward the development and production of more hypersonic missiles, and the commissioning of the Russian Navy's latest nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine.

"This year, the first launchers of the Sarmat missile complex with a new heavy missile will enter into combat duty. We will continue the mass production of hypersonic air-to-surface Kinzhal missiles and begin mass deliveries of anti-ship [hypersonic Zircon cruise missiles](#)," Putin said.

"The entry of [submarine] Emperor Alexander III into Russian Navy combat duty will ensure that the share of modern weapons and equipment in the naval strategic nuclear forces will reach 100%," Putin added. "In the coming years, the fleet's combat strength will be enhanced by three more similar ballistic missile submarines."

Like the Emperor Alexander III, the three subs will be of the [Project 955A Borei-A class](#) (NATO reporting name Dolgorukiy): Prince Pozharskiy, Prince Potemkin, and Dmitri Donskoy.

February 23, Defender of the Fatherland Day, marks the date in 1918 when the newly formed Red Army initiated the first mass draft in response to the outbreak of civil war following the Bolshevik seizure of power the previous November. It is also the day before the first anniversary of the launching of Russia's special operation in Ukraine in 2022.

Russia has 1,550 active nuclear warheads, in keeping with the limitations of the New START treaty signed with the United States. Earlier this week, Putin [announced a suspension](#) of Russia's participation in the bilateral inspections part of the treaty, saying Washington had made its fulfillment impossible for the time being.

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Xi Urges Politburo to Push Massive Effort to Place China at Head of Global 'Sci-Tech Revolution'

By - Fantine Gardinier

Chinese President Xi Jinping has urged the leading body of the Communist Party of China to invest more heavily in cultivating China's technological skill base in order to ensure it can be both self-sufficient and compete on a global scale.

Speaking to the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee on Wednesday, Xi urged greater investment in "basic research," including science education at an earlier age, as well as "strengthening the feasibility studies and the selection and evaluation of major basic research projects, fully respecting scientists' advice, and grasping the general trends to make an early start," in order to achieve "greater self-reliance and strength in science and technology" and to "become a world leader in science and technology," according to Chinese media.

Xi said the world was on the edge of a new "sci-tech revolution and industrial transformation," and China could be at the head of it.

While he emphasized the need for China to be as self-sufficient as possible, including in its scientific research, he also stressed that international cooperation was more important than ever, and urged the Politburo to build a platform for research cooperation and the establishment of a global scientific research fund. He said efforts should be made to enhance openness, trust and cooperation in the international sci-tech community.

China has long courted its tech sector to catapult the country towards modernity, with Xi [laying out a plan in 2017](#) for the socialist state to become a "moderately prosperous society" by 2020 and a "fully developed nation" and "a global leader in terms of comprehensive national power and international influence" by 2049, the centenary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, the budget for scientific research has remained comparatively small, with China getting much of its technological prowess from the Western companies that agree to set up shop there.

That is in part why the Communist Party has pushed up a new crop of party leaders with experience in aerospace, artificial intelligence and other strategically important areas.

Observers noted that after the [20th Party Congress](#) last October, their numbers in the newly Central Committee had reached nearly 40% - a level of tech expertise last seen in 1992, when then-leader Jiang Zemin began another major push to expand and advance the country's tech industry. In addition, the number of tech experts on the Politburo, a 24-person leadership body formed from the Central Committee, had risen to eight from just two before.

Perceiving the threat to its supremacy, the US has moved in recent years to snuff that effort, encouraging tech companies in the US and allied nations, by hook or by crook, to pull out of their business deals in China. The latest effort has been to [deny China access](#) to the world's most advanced microchips built in Taiwan and the Netherlands. However, [critics have noted](#) that such maneuvers will only push China into just the kind of self-sufficient policies Xi has proposed. Indeed, in December, Chinese media reported that Shenzhen-based tech giant Huawei had filed for a [patent on EUV lithography](#), the technology used to make those ultra-advanced microchips - evidently an innovation the company had been working on for years.

In July 2017, China's State Council also laid out the New Generation AI Development Plan, a [roadmap to becoming](#) a world leader in artificial intelligence by 2030, and set aside 400 billion yuan (\$59.07 billion) to develop the core of its AI industry by 2025.

Xi's emphasis on self-sufficient research groups is also in response to the growing hostility to Chinese nationals seen across US society, where [racist attacks against Asians](#) and Asian-Americans has increased precipitously since the COVID-19 pandemic began and the US government began blaming China for the respiratory virus. Chinese academics at US research institutions have faced new restrictions on funding, research-sharing, and other essential aspects of joint research ventures.

A study by the New York-based Institute of International Education [published in November 2022](#) found that in the 2019-20 academic year, the last before the pandemic, Chinese nationals accounted for 35% of foreigners studying in the US and contributed \$15.9 billion toward the US economy; but by 2022, that number had fallen by more than half.

"Even before the pandemic, Chinese students were shifting their study-abroad sights elsewhere, driven by doubts about whether they would feel welcome in the US and the emergence of more domestic and international alternatives. Travel restrictions and heightened safety concerns during the pandemic accelerated that decline," said the report.

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'He's Young': Palin Says DeSantis 'Doesn't Need to Run' in 2024 POTUS Race, Urges Trump Support

By - Fantine Gardinier

Former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin has sounded off against Florida Governor Ron DeSantis seeking the presidency in 2024 on the Republican ticket, even though he hasn't announced his candidacy yet. Polls show GOP voters prefer DeSantis over former US President Donald Trump, who has Palin's backing.

Speaking to US media earlier this week, Palin said Trump has the best chance to win the GOP Primary race and the 2024 presidential election overall, and urged at least one potential challenger to step aside.

"DeSantis doesn't need to [run]. I envision him as our president someday but not right now," Palin said. "He should stay governor for a bit longer. He's young, you know. He has decades ahead of him where he can be our president."

The Florida executive, who just won reelection in November, hasn't yet announced his candidacy for president, but if he did, DeSantis would be 46 years old at the time of the election - two years older than Palin when she appeared on the 2008 Republican ticket as the vice presidential candidate alongside the late Sen. John McCain (R-AZ). McCain and Palin lost the election to then-Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL).

Palin, who mounted a separate failed bid to seize the northerly state's open US House of Representatives seat last year, said Trump has the 2024 nomination in the bag. She also offered up some thoughts about who the real estate mogul might choose as his running mate. "When you talk about the specific people, the individual people who are looking at putting their hat in the ring... they got a lot of guts thinking they're gonna go up against Trump," Palin said.

"Trump needs to choose somebody who, like him, has nothing to lose," she said of a potential running mate for Trump. "What more can they do to that person personally or verbal attacks or anything else on family? That person has been through the wringer, so they know what they're getting into. And that person then can just focus on doing what's right for the people."

When asked, she replied she was "not necessarily" suggesting herself.

"However, I'll tell you, the opportunity that I had to run with someone who wasn't as commonsense [of a] constitutional conservative as I, and I think the majority of Republicans were, but still having the opportunity to form a team like that in running, in offering ourselves up in service to America—oh my goodness, no greater honor, no greater opportunity," she added. DeSantis has left some vague hints he is considering a presidential run, and is expected to make such an announcement this spring. After Nikki Haley, a former governor of South Carolina and former US ambassador to the United Nations, [announced the launch](#) of her primary campaign earlier this month, a reporter asked DeSantis if it would prompt him to announce as well.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he replied.

Despite not announcing, [polls show Republicans](#) prefer DeSantis to Trump in a 2024 matchup, and that he would likely do well against US President Joe Biden, a Democrat, [if he seeks reelection](#). Conservative US media outlets have also made their preference for DeSantis clear, as Trump is wracked with one scandal after another. That has prompted Trump to unleash his characteristic smear tactics against the Florida governor, who he has [nicknamed "Ron DeSanctimonious."](#)

Palin did not comment on Haley's presidential bid. On Tuesday, Vivek Ramaswamy, a conservative businessman who is the author of several "anti-woke" books in recent years, [announced his campaign](#) for the GOP nomination as well.

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Video: IDF Confirms Iron Dome Intercepted Five Rockets Launched From Gaza Strip

The rocket launches were carried out not long after an Israeli raid in Nablus killed at least 11 Palestinians and left some 100 others injured. With the raid having sparked calls for retaliation, the rocket volley recalls the January clashes that kicked up tensions between Israeli and Palestinian forces.

Six rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel early Thursday, the Israel Defense Forces has confirmed.

The Israeli force detailed that of the six rockets launched from Gaza, five were downed by the Iron Dome missile defense system. The sixth projectile was said to have fallen in an open area. Air raid sirens initially sounded along cities situated along the Gazan borders, such as in Ashkelon and Sderot. Early reports suggested explosions had been heard in the region. Footage emerging on social media offered insight into the early morning incidents.

The latest round of rocket volley came hours after Israeli officials gave the greenlight for yet another West Bank raid, which ended with the death of 10 Palestinians and dozens of others sustaining injuries.

The Israeli military earlier stated that Wednesday's operation had only killed three "terrorists" who were part of a militant group that recently carried out shooting attacks against Israeli citizens. The rare daytime raid was held in the West Bank city of Nablus.

The recent operation has drawn condemnation and highlighted a pattern by the Israeli military, which in January marked one of its deadliest raid operations in the West Bank after multiple Palestinians were killed.

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Trump Slams Biden for Ohio Inaction, Ukraine Funding: 'Hope There's Some Left' for East Palestine

By - Wyatt Reed

The former president told audiences in East Palestine: "I sincerely hope" that when Biden gets "back from touring Ukraine, that he's got some money left over – cause now we're at \$117 billion."

Former US President Donald Trump blasted the Biden administration for its "indifference and betrayal" in a widely-discussed speech delivered Wednesday in East Palestine, Ohio, as the current president was meeting Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky in Kiev.

In a speech in which Biden's absence loomed large, Trump assured residents of East Palestine that they "are not forgotten," thanked first responders for "serving bravely in the line of duty," and promised accountability for the public health catastrophe unfolding in their town.

But Trump reserved tougher words for those he holds responsible for the disaster, telling residents that "unfortunately, as you know, in too many cases your goodness and perseverance were met with indifference and betrayal," noting that "Biden and FEMA said they would not send federal aid to East Palestine under any circumstances."

The Biden administration repeatedly turned down requests for disaster relief in the aftermath of a so-called "controlled release" in which dozens of train cars filled with toxic chemicals were burned in open-air fires after derailling earlier this month.

On Friday, an official with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) [claimed](#) in comments given to Fox News that while "FEMA is on the frontlines when there is a hurricane or tornado... this situation is different," and that "what East Palestine needs is much more expansive than what FEMA can provide."

But just hours after Trump announced he would be visiting the town, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and FEMA issued a joint statement announcing federal emergency officials were being dispatched to the region after all.

Trump referenced the bizarre turn of events in his Wednesday speech, telling East Palestine residents: “I thought that was a strange statement [that] they were doing nothing for you,” and “were intending on doing nothing for you.”

“FEMA said specifically this doesn’t meet the criteria,” he noted, but “when I announced that I was coming they changed their tune.”

“It was an amazing phenomenon,” he added, and one which represented “a quick rapid change” from the federal government’s previous position.

Still, Biden has yet to commit to visiting ground zero himself. US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who has faced widespread criticism for his handling of the disaster, has pledged to visit the town but refuses to say when he’ll do so. But that didn’t stop him from getting in a not-so-subtle dig at Trump nonetheless:

“There is a chance for everybody who has a public voice on this issue to demonstrate – whether they are interested in helping the people of East Palestine or using the people of East Palestine,” Buttigieg said in an interview with Politico published Wednesday.

Democrats have sought to portray the derailment as Trump’s responsibility, since his administration loosened regulations on railroad companies during his tenure. Following Trump’s visit, the Biden White House [went as far](#) as accusing Trump of “selling [East Palestine] out to rail industry lobbyists” and demanding the former president apologize.

But Trump told East Palestine residents Wednesday that “what this community needs now are not excuses... but answers and results.” He urged rail giant Norfolk Southern to “fulfill its responsibilities and obligations” to the town, and drew a clear connection between Biden’s absence and the huge quantities of taxpayer money being funneled to the Zelensky regime by the US government.

“I sincerely hope that when your representatives and all of the politicians – including Biden – [when] they get back from touring Ukraine, that he’s got some money left over,” Trump continued. “Cause now we’re at \$117 billion, as you probably know.”

“If they don’t come back and give you the treatment you need, we will be back,” he pledged, concluding: “The Biden administration should ensure that every family has the option of moving, and homes, and everything else, until this thing is straightened out.”

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America Last Again - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

Residents of East Palestine, Ohio, have sounded the alarm and blasted the federal government for failing to do enough to address the public health crisis plaguing the region after Norfolk Southern decided to deal with a train derailment by torching huge quantities of vinyl chloride in early February.

Many residents have questioned why US President Joe Biden has failed to visit the scene, as the commander-in-chief has instead elected to spend time with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kiev.

The Mayor of East Palestine, Trent Conaway, said Monday he was “furious” that Biden is “in the Ukraine giving billions of dollars to people over there and not to us.”

The president’s decision to visit Zelensky in Ukraine rather than Ohio “was the biggest slap in the face,” Conaway told Fox News, adding, “that tells you right now — he doesn’t care about us.”

However, where Biden failed, another commander-in-chief has since delivered.

With Biden away on foreign business, former US President Donald Trump turned out for the East Palestine community, bringing with him water bottles and a promise for improved conditions. Never one to refuse a dig at Biden, Trump told locals he hoped Biden returned from his European tour with "some money" left in the bank.

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East Palestine Spox Blasts Biden: He ‘Feels Safer in a War Zone in Ukraine’ Than Ohio
By - Wyatt Reed

For nearly three weeks, residents of East Palestine, Ohio, have dealt with the aftermath of a severe train derailment that prompted a chemical spill and saw officials opt to conduct a 'controlled' burn of hazardous chemicals. As backlash has grown against government officials and the freight firm, criticism has surged against the US president.

A spokesman for the people of East Palestine spoke with Sputnik News about the “disappointment” surrounding Joe Biden’s decision to travel to Ukraine instead of East Palestine, criticized the authorities’ response to the crisis, and said Ohio communities have had to step up and come together to solve their problems on their own.

“I was out of town on business and my buddy texted me and he says, basically, ‘Hey, there's a train derailment in Palestine.’ But about 15 minutes later, I'm getting probably 10, 15, 20, 30 texts a minute. And it's: ‘your town's on fire.’”

East Palestine, Ohio, has seen derailments before – but none like this.

That’s according to DJ Yokley, an East Palestine resident who’s been appointed spokesman for the village in the days since authorities decided to burn huge quantities of toxic chemicals on a derailed train there, kickstarting a public health crisis that’s caused alarm across the globe.

In a wide-ranging interview, Yokley told Sputnik News that people began returning to East Palestine less than 12 hours after an evacuation order was issued because officials failed to warn them of the dangers they faced.

“They evacuated the town that night and then people came back that morning on Saturday,” Yokley said, “because nobody was communicating as to how bad it was.”

“They just said there's a train derailment,” Yokley explained, adding that people there weren’t given answers about the nature of the chemicals in question.

“Nobody knew what was on the manifest for like a week.”

What’s clear, however, is that authorities wasted no time in getting the train up and running after the derailment:

“They listed the evacuation at about 5:15 p.m. My wheels were in the driveway by 5:30. By 5:41, there was a train coming through back on the tracks.”

According to Yokley, that’s because rail authorities “moved the train just enough to get the train rolling down the tracks and get back in business, because they’re losing tens of million dollars a day every time that the trains aren’t run on the track.”

In the time since, profits have continued to roll in for Norfolk Southern. But for residents of the small village of East Palestine, their lives have been upended – perhaps permanently.

One such man is Yokley himself, who operates the sports news and streaming website Your Sports Network and emerged as an impromptu spokesman for the village after neighbors urged him to speak up on their behalf.

Having previously served on the council, Yokley says: “I wanted to fight. I wanted to stand up for my town. But I didn’t want to lose my business. And I didn’t want to lose my family because of it.”

After praying on the matter, Yokley says he got a text from a friend, who asked: “If you’re not going to do something, who is?”

“That was the push that I needed,” Yokley says. “I started speaking up and began asking questions on behalf of the residents...questions that I’d want to know the answers to.”

That kind of tenacity was necessary, according to the village spokesman, because of the information blackout that shrouded the incident in the immediate aftermath.

“In the early stages there was no communication – zero,” Yokley says. “My information was coming from Facebook.” There’s still “not enough information,” he says, “but we’re getting there little by little.”

Now, after “three weeks almost to the day of the train derailment,” Yokley says “they’re still talking about how the best way is to communicate.”

According to locals, there’s plenty of blame to go around for the breakdown in communication.

“Everybody” holds some of the blame, “from a standpoint of government,” Yokley says. “Norfolk Southern, the [Environmental Protection Agency] EPA – nobody has communicated anything very well until the last few days.”

Generally speaking, authorities were dragged into doing their jobs “kicking and screaming,” says Yokley. Only “calling people out publicly” seemed to get results, he adds.

As the crisis drags out, health symptoms have mounted among residents, who’ve complained of chronic headaches and recurring rashes after using the water.

It’s “serious enough that people are having complications,” Yokley says. “It’s much like COVID from a standpoint of health issues” in that “some people get it, some people don’t,” and “some people are having different symptoms than others.”

Meanwhile, he says “people are getting their independent studies and the independent testing done, but the insurance companies aren’t covering it,” and “the government isn’t covering that” either.

But for now, Yokley is urging people to follow the guidelines and recommendations issued by federal officials.

“The EPA’s told us our water is safe in town. They’ve told us that our air is safe. They’ve told us that every box has been checked.”

Given the situation's parallels to the uncertainty of the COVID pandemic, Yokley says he understands "people are questioning" the narrative, but says "we have to go by what they're telling us."

"Everybody's waiting" to be told they can "go back, drink the water, do everything, you know, and resume your life," Yokley notes. "But we want to make sure that you don't grow a third arm and we want to make sure that we don't start dying off."

After weeks of little to no response by the Federal Emergency Management Agency – which claimed the situation was "different" from a natural disaster and thus the village did not qualify for federal assistance – FEMA finally announced Friday night that it would be sending representatives.

The announcement came just hours after former US President Donald Trump declared he'd be visiting the area, leading the former commander-in-chief to conclude he'd managed to get the Biden administration to 'move' on the issue.

But while Biden's Transportation Secretary, Pete Buttigieg, has promised to come to town at an unspecified date in the future, the current president hasn't even committed to that.

Instead, Biden decided to fly to Kiev to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, leading East Palestine Mayor Mike Conaway to declare he was "furious" that Biden is "in the Ukraine giving billions of dollars to people over there and not to us."

"That was the biggest slap in the face," Conaway told Fox News, concluding: "that tells you right now — he doesn't care about us."

Yokley echoed the sentiment, telling Sputnik "we're disappointed" because "we know we're being politicized."

"At the end of the day, the leader of the free world feels safer in a war zone in Ukraine than he does in his own backyard."

"It's frustrating because we've felt alone over the last three weeks," Yokley says, adding "our government was not involved."

Yokley had even less optimism about Buttigieg, who's refused to say when he'll travel to Ohio and repeatedly [declined](#) to answer questions from a Daily Caller reporter on Tuesday because he was "taking some personal time" away from the issue.

"I saw that Pete Buttigieg didn't want people asking him about East Palestine because he 'did it all day' and he 'needed some personal time for him,'" Yokley says.

"That's great. Have your personal time," the spokesman continues. "But we're going to sit here and work, and I'm going to work 24/7 until my town is built back better than ever."

"And when that happens, don't sit there and wave the magic wand and say that you are part of it if your hands were not in the pile," he continued.

"I don't care if Joe Biden, our president, comes or not. But if you're not going to come, stop talking about it and let the people that are going to work, work. That's the end of the story."

Eschewing the labels that have been hoisted on the village, Yokley reminded the press: "We are not a poverty-stricken redneck town of 4,700 – we're 4,700 people that are strong-willed underdogs that have been underdogs our entire life."

"We are Anytown, America and every-town America, and we've got train tracks running through our back yard just like everybody else," Yokley declared with pride.

"The difference is, there is a nuclear explosion on our train tracks and we got to clean it up."

“Our residents and community members remain committed to making sure that we hold the EPA, our government at the local, state, federal levels and also Norfolk Southern accountable.” Calling out to “business owners, residents of East Palestine, and the surrounding areas,” Yokley says that “now’s the time that we hold feet to the fire.”

“And if they’re talking out of their tail, we have to make sure that they have to answer to us,” he adds.

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Put Down That Muffin Soldier: Pentagon Says Poppy Seeds Are Linked to Failed Drug Tests
By - Mary Manley

Because the seeds are naturally derived from the poppy plant, some of those seeds can contain levels of morphine and codeine that will show up in a drug test used by the Department of Defense (DoD).

In a [memo](#) posted on Tuesday, the Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Gilbert Cisneros Jr. warned service members that “consumption of poppy seed products could cause a codeine positive urinalysis result and undermine the Department’s ability to identify illicit drug use.”

The reason for this, the DoD said, is because poppy seeds are naturally derived from the poppy plant, and they can absorb opium extract while being harvested.

“Out of an abundance of caution, I find protecting service members and the integrity of the drug testing program requires a warning to avoid poppy seeds,” Cisneros wrote.

The Pentagon sent this warning to its 1.3 million active-duty soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines to avoid eating anything that contains poppy seeds including bagels, muffins, and cakes.

According to the US Anti-Doping Agency, which is the national organization for US Olympic sports, it can be detected in the urine “up to 48 hours after ingestion.”

Pentagon spokesperson Navy Cdr. Nicole [Schwegman](#) has stated the Defense Department first became aware of a potential issue with poppy seeds in 2022. Following that initial concern they then contracted an independent lab to test the codeine and morphine contamination levels in different poppy seed brands.

The Pentagon is now reviewing codeine-only positive drug tests that date back all the way to 2019, the spokesperson added.

“The amount of poppy seeds consumed, concentration of codeine detected in urine and time of consumption relative to the drug test are also important factors,” Schwegman said. “As we gather more information, we will reassess and update as appropriate.”

The Pentagon first established their drug testing program, named the “Drug Demand Reduction Program” in 1981, in order to deter DoD employees from abusing illicit drugs or misusing prescription drugs. All service members are required to participate in random urinalysis testing.

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Powerful Magnitude 6.8 Earthquake Rattles Eastern Tajikistan - USGS

By - Mary Manley

In 2015 the deadliest earthquake to strike within 300 kilometers of Murghob, Tajikistan was a magnitude 7.5 earthquake that resulted in 399 casualties. In 1911 a magnitude 7.4 earthquake struck the area, leading to 90 casualties.

A powerful magnitude 6.8 earthquake struck eastern Tajikistan early Thursday, officials with the US Geological Survey (USGS) have confirmed.

Meanwhile, the Chinese seismological center has rated the quake at 7.3 on the Richter scale. The USGS also recorded three aftershocks following the earthquake, one of which occurred 86 kilometers west of [Murghob](#) measuring a magnitude of 5.0 and struck the area about eight minutes following the 6.8 magnitude earthquake. The second aftershock was a 4.6 magnitude earthquake 103 kilometers west of Murghob.

The third aftershock struck the area and was measured to be a 4.9 magnitude earthquake and hit the area about 60 kilometers west of Murghob. The fourth aftershock occurred over an hour after the initial earthquake about 64 kilometers west of Murghob and measured at a magnitude level of 4.8.

One person in [Kazakhstan](#), about 657 kilometers northeast of the epicenter, said that the earthquake was "very noticeable" on the first floor of their building. Another said there were tremors in Almaty, Kazakhstan, about the same distance from the epicenter.

Another eyewitness in Almaty said they were on the 26th floor where their chandeliers were shaking from the effects of the earthquake. Another testimony said the shaking lasted for at least 10 seconds.

"It was continuous shaking for almost a minute. Terrifying," said an eyewitness in Pakistan about 491 kilometers south from the epicenter.

About 100 earthquakes measured between 6.1 and 6.9 magnitudes occur every year. These earthquakes can cause a lot of damage in very populated areas, according to [Michigan Tech University](#).

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Prince Harry and Meghan Markle Dismiss 'South Park' Lawsuit Rumor

By - Mary Manley

The Duchess of Sussex was reportedly "upset and overwhelmed" by the South Park episode, which did not name the couple but described two cartoon look-alikes as the "Prince of Canada and his wife" and portrayed them as attention-seeking, self-victimizing individuals pretending to desire privacy.

Prince Harry and Meghan [Markle](#) are not suing over the South Park episode that depicted the two as attention-seekers. A spokesperson for the couple has denied the rumor, saying: "It's all frankly nonsense. Totally baseless, boring reports."

The South Park episode was titled the "Worldwide Privacy Tour" and focused on a "prince of Canada" and "his wife" who moved to the town of South Park, and are essentially caricatures of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

The show depicts the two characters traveling to different locations around the world on what they call the "Worldwide Privacy Tour" while carrying signs that read: "Stop Looking At Us!" and "We Want Our Privacy!"

The episode reportedly "upset and overwhelmed" Markle, and she found it "annoying" but "refused to watch it all," according to a [source](#). In the episode, the caricature of Markle is described as a "sorority girl, actress, influencer and victim."

After the couple stepped down from their roles as 'senior' members of the British royal family, they delivered an explosive interview with famed interviewer Oprah Winfrey explaining their decision to do so. One of the couple's greatest grievances was their lack of privacy from paparazzi and journalists, and what they reportedly claimed as a lack of support from fellow members of the royal family.

Following that interview, the couple then delivered a documentary about their personal life and their decision to leave the royal family on the streaming service [Netflix](#) in December 2022. It was revealed last month that the documentary was Netflix's second-highest ranked documentary in history. Not long after, Harry released his memoir, Spare, while attending interviews in preparation for the book's release.

"I think everyone has a basic right to privacy. Basic. We're not talking about anything that anybody else wouldn't expect," Markle said when asked by Winfrey in 2021 if she had expected to lose her right to privacy, once she became a royal.

After their Netflix documentary aired, the Duke and Duchess' global press secretary released a statement addressing the assumption that the couple desired a more private life.

"Their statement announcing their decision to step back mentions nothing of privacy and reiterates their desire to continue their roles and public duties," [the spokesperson said](#).

"Any suggestion otherwise speaks to a key point of this series," she continued. "They are choosing to share their story, on their terms, and yet the tabloid media has created an entirely untrue narrative that permeates press coverage and public opinion. The facts are right in front of them."

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Florida Shooting Spree Kills at Least 3, Including TV Reporter & 9-Year-Old Child

WASHINGTON (Sputnik) - A gunman in the state of Florida allegedly killed three people, including a television reporter and a 9-year-old girl, and injured two others during a shooting spree that took place throughout the day, the Orange County Sheriff's Office said in a statement. "The suspect in a series of shootings today that left three dead, including a woman in her 20's, a 9-year-old girl and a News 13 employee. We extend our deepest condolences to all of their families," the sheriff's office said Wednesday.

Orange County Sheriff John Mina during earlier remarks said the suspect, 19-year-old Keith Melvin Moses, is in police custody.

The [shooter](#) had killed a 20-year-old woman early Wednesday in Orange County, Florida, and then returned to the scene later in the day and continued his shooting spree, killing a reporter who was covering the murder from that morning. A 9-year-old from a nearby home was also killed at this period.

Two others were also shot, including the mother of the 9-year-old, and a photographer who was working with the slain News 13 reporter. The photographer and the reporter were shot while in their vehicle.

"No one in our community — not a mother, not a 9-year-old and certainly not news professionals — should become the victim of gun violence in our community," said Mina.

A fellow News 13 reporter broke down in tears while covering the story of her slain colleague.

"I apologize, this is really difficult to cover," the News 13 reporter said. "It is very emotional here at Orlando Regional Medical Center, I'm not even going to turn the camera, because there are people here who knew that reporter and his fiancée and I were just embracing."

"But I will say this, it is nice to see all the media - we come together in solidarity in this moment. This is every reporter's absolutely worst nightmare. We go home at night afraid that something like this will occur, and that is what happened here."

Charter Communications, which is the parent company of [News 13](#), said they were "deeply saddened by the loss of [their] colleague and the other lives senselessly taken today."

Mina added that investigators are still working to get the shooter's motive. He said the shooter's first victim, a 20-year-old woman, was someone he was acquainted with and that he shot her "in a vehicle" at about 11 a.m. local time. He returned to the scene and continued his shooting spree at 4 p.m., where he shot the News 13 reporter and the photographer.

The suspect's criminal history includes charges of aggravated battery, assault with a deadly weapon, burglary and grand theft and gun violations.

"Our hearts go out to the family of the journalist killed today and the crew member injured in Orange County, Florida, as well as the whole Spectrum News team," Karine Jean-Pierre, the [White House press secretary](#), said on Twitter.

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US Plans to More Than Quadruple Troop Presence in Taiwan - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States plans to significantly boost its troop presence in Taiwan and more than quadruple the number of soldiers stationed there due to what

it regards as a rising threat from China, The Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday, citing US officials

The US currently has 30 troops stationed on the island but plans to send an additional 100 to 200 soldiers there in the coming months, the report said.

The larger contingent of soldiers will include special-operations forces and US Marines, who will be tasked with expanding an existing training program that the Pentagon has sought to keep out of the public eye, according to the report.

The goal of the expanded training program is to get Taiwan to adopt a "porcupine strategy," or an asymmetric military method aimed at repelling any Chinese offensive on the island, according to the report.

Separately, the Pentagon is also running a training program for a group of Taiwanese military soldiers at Camp Grayling in northern Michigan, the report said. That program, which is being conducted by the Michigan National Guard, has seen the Taiwanese soldiers take part in annual drills with multiple countries.

The Pentagon's expanded training efforts come amid rising tensions between the US and China after a Chinese balloon seen traversing the continental US a few weeks ago sparked a diplomatic furor that led US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to cancel a planned trip to Beijing.

Taiwan has long been a flash point in US-Chinese relations, and Pentagon officials have recently said they believe that China intends to invade the island by the end of this decade.

The island has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan — a territory with its own elected government — maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence. Beijing opposes any official contacts of foreign states with Taipei and considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

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US Seeks Strong Condemnation of Russia in G20 Communique - Yellen

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States will seek a strong condemnation of Russia's conflict with Ukraine in the communique of the upcoming G20 meeting in India, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Thursday.

"I believe the communique is still under discussion," Yellen said during a press briefing in Bengaluru. "Certainly we would like to see a strong condemnation of the war, of the impact it's had on Ukraine and on the global economic outlook."

Yellen added that the communique issued during the previous G20 meeting in Bali "contained strong language" on the conflict, noting that condemning Russia was "achievable in the context of G20."

The city of Bengaluru will host the G20 finance ministers' meeting from February 24-25.

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Yellen Vows to Focus on Continued Robust Support for Ukraine at G20 Meeting in India

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen said on Thursday she will focus on continued robust support for Ukraine at the upcoming G20 meeting in India.

"We believe it's critical that the IMF [International Monetary Fund] move swiftly toward a fully financed program for Ukraine – as they have said they will do. Continued, robust support for Ukraine will be a major topic of discussion during my time here in India," Yellen told reporters in Bengaluru, India.

Yellen recalled that the United States expects to provide around \$10 billion in additional economic support for Ukraine in the coming months.

In total, the country has provided over \$46 billion in security, economic and humanitarian assistance to Kiev, she noted.

The secretary also underscored the importance of applying pressure on the Russian economy. "Our twin goals are to degrade Russia's military-industrial complex and reduce the revenues that it can use to fund its war," she said.

Washington sees the impact of sanctions and other restrictions on Russia, Yellen added, arguing that the Russian economy has become increasingly isolated since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine.

Bengaluru will host the G20 finance ministers' meeting from February 24-25.

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Saudi Arabia Working on Bringing Conjoined Twins From Syria to Separate - Relief Center

RIYADH, February 23 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia is working to bring and separate refugees who are conjoined twins to Riyadh, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Rabeeah, Adviser to the Royal Court and Supervisor General of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre told Sputnik.

"We have a set of Syrian refugees who are conjoined twins. We are working to bring them here, and there is one from Africa, so there's two sets coming," Al-Rabeeah said.

When asked when the surgery would take place, he said, "I will say in the coming three months."

"We have done sets of twins from Iraq in a surgery that we did eight weeks ago successfully, a surgery that lasted for over 15 hours, and also last Thursday, we have done a surgery for sets of twins from Yemen," he shared. "This is number eight from Yemen and that one from Iraq is like number 7 from Iraq and also another success for the twins. So that's brings our total sets of twins to 55 from 23 countries."

Al-Rabeeah spoke on the sidelines of the 3rd Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum in Riyadh.

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Saudi Arabia Relief Center Head Says Wants to See Grain Deal Extended

RIYADH, February 23 (Sputnik) - The head of Saudi Arabia's King Salman Humanitarian Aid center, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Rabeeah, told Sputnik he wants to see the grain deal extended and politics put aside.

"I want to see the grain from Russia, from Ukraine or any country that can provide grain extended because honestly nothing more painful than to see people hungry," Al-Rabeeah said. "I want to see the grain supplies available and so that people will be able at least to eat peacefully."

He also said he wants the Ukraine conflict resolved for the purposes of regional stability as much as he wants the Yemen conflict solved.

"My wishes are equally that we will see long lasting political solution in Ukraine that provides stability for all countries involved," he said.

Al-Rabeeah stressed that Saudi Arabia wants to see stability in Ukraine, wants to see stability in Yemen, and in Syria as well as in other places.

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Situation in Yemen Has Improved Over Last Year - Saudi Relief Center

RIYADH, February 23 (Sputnik) - The situation in Yemen has improved in the last year, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Rabeeah, Adviser to the Royal Court and Supervisor General of King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center told Sputnik.

"It has improved. If you look at the UN report it shows that the hunger issue has improved. And there are less reports of famine this year. So this is a good sign. However, that doesn't mean that Yemen doesn't need anything. There's still a big need," Al-Rabeeah stressed. "Still there is food insecurity, still there is health facilities that are fragile, but I would say it has not deteriorated, it has stabilized."

Additionally, Al-Rabeeah expressed hope that an upcoming pledging conference for Yemen in Europe will bring attention once again to the conflict- torn country.

"Saudi Arabia has not changed its work. KSR is working day and night in Yemen," Al-Rabeeah said. "It is still for us the country that we work most in. Unfortunately, that attention has declined globally, but I hear there is a pledging conference coming in Geneva I guess next week, and we hope that this pledging conference will raise the attention once again to Yemen."

Al-Rabeeah stressed that Saudi Arabia is doing its best to see there is more stability in Yemen.

Yemen has been gripped by an internal conflict between the government forces and the rebel Houthi movement for over six years. Since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition fighting on the government's side has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the rebels. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and bomber drones on Saudi territory. The United Nations World Food Programme reports that nearly half of Yemen's population, or 16.2 million people, are food insecure, describing the situation in the region as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

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Saudi Relief Center Says Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan Worse Since Taliban Takeover

RIYADH, February 23 (Sputnik) - - The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated since the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) came to power, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Rabeeah, advisor to the Royal Court and supervisor general of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center, told Sputnik.

However, he stressed that the challenges did not prevent the Center from working there.

"The biggest needs are food security, health, of course education," he added.

The center that is working on the ground in Afghanistan noted that they are facing difficulties in their work in the country and expressed hope that the Taliban will improve access as they have plans to do more in the country.

"We have challenges in Afghanistan, big challenges," Al-Rabeeah said. "We're hoping that the Taliban will ease off so that we can expand our work. Same thing which is happening for other countries. The challenges in Afghanistan are big and we hope that the Taliban government will ease the humanitarian side and improve access because we have plans to do more."

"That did not stop us from working," he said. "We have an office in Kabul that has now been moved down to Pakistan because of the danger but we have worked with several projects, including food security, health projects, but there are a lot of challenges."

After the Taliban took over the government in Afghanistan in August of 2021, the US and several allies cut-off external aid that had funded 80% of government expenditures, equivalent to 40% of GDP. Economic disarray and food shortages followed that pushed the country to the brink of a humanitarian crisis.

In a report last month, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) warned that Afghanistan faces a very real risk of "systemic collapse," with nearly 66% of the population needing aid, including some 17 million facing acute hunger.

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Saudi Arabia Relief Center Ready to Help East Ukraine If Requested - Supervisor General

RIYADH, February 23 (Sputnik) - Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Rabeeah, Adviser to the Royal Court and Supervisor General of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center told Sputnik that the center will help the people in eastern Ukraine if such a request comes from their authorities.

"Certainly we will work with our partners. East Ukraine is not different than any part of the world. We help people irrespective of where they are," Al-Rabeeah said. "If that's in need, we do not differentiate between parts but what we have received so far is a request from the government of Ukraine, we haven't received from the East part yet."

Al-Rabeeah noted that the center provides assistance to refugees in Europe and is prepared to help people in Ukraine.

The UN agencies for humanitarian and refugee affairs appealed last week for \$5 billion in humanitarian aid to help more than 15 million Ukrainians affected by the conflict. Out of this sum, \$3.9 billion has been requested under the Humanitarian Response Plan for Ukraine to provide 11.1 million people with food and medicines.

The remainder in the amount of \$1.7 billion will be used to help 4.2 million Ukrainian refugees hosted in 10 countries – Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia – under the Refugee Response Plan.

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Saudi Arabia's KSRelief Urges More Neutral, Evidence-Based Approach to Humanitarian Aid

RIYADH, February 23 (Sputnik) - The international community needs a more neutral and evidence-based approach to delivering humanitarian assistance and distributing resources, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Rabeeah, advisor to the Royal Court and supervisor general of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center, told Sputnik.

"I think that the attention is not neutral. The international community's attention to conflicts, or to disasters or to economy is not neutral. And if an event happens in one country or region, the attention will be high and the funding will be high. If it is in a remote [location], like Africa or any other part of the world, it will probably not receive the same attention and that's a big problem in the humanitarian community," Al-Rabeeah said.

Al-Rabeeah spoke on the sidelines of the third Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum, during which a number of speakers raised the issue of some countries being well-supported, including Ukraine, while others being underfunded like countries in Africa and Latin America.

"There should be a system where all of those data are collected and the needs assessment is collected by a digital system, analyzed by digital system based on artificial intelligence and good research, so that we divert resources to the high-need people," Al-Rabeeah said. "I'm not against any country, I'm with every country, but also we should not forget those who are most in need. So I feel that we have a long way to coordinate our work and to use our evidence-based science in our work."

Poor coordination is part of the problem and was also discussed during the forum, he added.

"In some parts, we may be overfunded and in other parts we're may be extremely underfunded. That's because of incoordination," he said. "So that has been discussed openly and widely and also we lack the research, we lack evidence-based science. The science community, the research community is still far away from humanitarian work. They have to be active because if we involve them, we'll probably increase the impact of humanitarian work on the ground." Most of the discussions at the forum, Al-Rabeeah noted, focused on the increasing demand for aid due to conflicts, natural disasters, economic issues and the coronavirus crisis. The issue of priorities was also addressed.

"Honestly, all of us are worried how we define priorities and there is a vagueness on defining priorities," he explained. "What I myself feel, we should utilize appropriate data collections using digitalization, artificial intelligence and then use this data ... to choose the priority based on evidence and not based on motives. So, this is something that has been discussed openly and clearly."

The participants also discussed how they can utilize host communities and invest in them and also build the capacity for local actors, the KSRelief chief said.

The humanitarian forum in Riyadh brought together several dozen humanitarian organizations and officials from various countries.

Al-Rabeeah expressed the belief that the forum, which also saw one-to-one meetings between UN officials, politicians and humanitarian organizations as well as some 30 agreements struck, will "mature into something which is going to benefit humanitarian players."

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RPT - Biden Should Fly to Moscow Now if He Wanted to End Nuke Crisis - Nobel Peace Group Founder

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden if he had any insight into the severity of the nuclear crisis would immediately fly to Moscow to engage in talks to end it, founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility, Dr. Helen Caldicott, told Sputnik.

Russian President Vladimir Putin officially announced Russia was pulling out of its long-running talks with the United States for a new START treaty during his Tuesday address to the Federal Assembly. He also accused the United States of developing new types of nuclear weapons and considering new nuclear weapons tests.

"If Biden had any insight into this terminal diagnosis he would fly to Moscow and negotiate an end to this nuclear madness," Caldicott said. "Instead, the relevant politicians operate from a testosterone-fueled imperative much the same way as they did during the first and second world wars."

Caldicott also said no one involved in this bi-continental "nuclear mess" seems to contemplate or even understand that they are playing blind man's bluff with humanity's common future. Putin's two-year suspension of the START talks "bodes extremely ill for the future of planetary life," she added.

However, pushed into a corner by the US and NATO, Putin has really no other way to respond but to use his nuclear arsenal as a counterpoint to the consistent arming of the Ukraine and drone attacks on his nuclear air bases, Caldicott said.

Caldicott warned of misunderstandings and confusion at this time of high international tension with nuclear launch mechanisms on a higher state of alert.

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TV Reporter, 9-Year-Old Girl Among Three Killed in Florida Shooting Spree - Police

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - A gunman in the state of Florida allegedly killed three people, including a television reporter and a 9-year-old girl, and injured two others during a shooting spree that took place throughout the day, the Orange County Sheriff's Office said in a statement.

"The suspect in a series of shootings today that left three dead, including a woman in her 20's a 9-year-old girl and a News13 employee. We extend our deepest condolences to all of their families," the sheriff's office said Wednesday.

Orange County Sheriff John Mina during earlier remarks said the suspect, 19-year-old Keith Melvin Moses, is in police custody.

Moses has been charged with allegedly killing a woman in her 20s Wednesday morning and more charges are expected to be filed against him for shooting four additional victims later in the afternoon.

Mina added that investigators are still working to get the shooter's motive.

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Biden Admin. Cutting Insurance Payments on Federal Mortgages by 40% Soon - Vice President

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is reducing mortgage insurance payment for all new Federal Homeowners Administration (FHA) homeowners starting later next month, Vice President Kamala Harris announced.

"I am proud to announce that starting on March 20 we are reducing mortgage insurance payments for all new FHA homeowners by nearly 40%," Harris said on Wednesday.

The move was designed to provide relief and extra spending power for low wage and lower middle class home-owning families, Harris said.

"What this means is on average homeowners will spend at least \$800 a month less on their mortgage," Harris said.

Some 850,000 homeowners a year would benefit from the new discount, she added.

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Twenty US Governors Form Alliance to Protect Abortion Rights - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Governors from 20 US states said they have formed a coalition to protect and expand reproductive freedoms, rights and healthcare across the country. "The Alliance is a non-partisan coalition of 20 governors committed to protecting and expanding reproductive freedom in their states, the largest such coalition ever convened," the governors, all Democrats, said in a joint statement on Wednesday. "The Alliance will work together to strengthen reproductive freedom in the face of an unprecedented assault on abortion access and other forms of reproductive health care by states hostile to abortion rights and judges who are advancing their ideological agenda."

In about half the states in the country, the governors said, doctors face criminal prosecution for providing care and extremists are hard at work using a variety of mean in their attempt to restrict access to contraception and outlaw abortions and reproductive rights.

The conflict surrounding Roe v. Wade and the constitutional right of women to have an abortion ratcheted up in May 2022 when a draft opinion was leaked. The leak sparked protests at the homes of justices, in front of the US Supreme Court and elsewhere. In June, the final opinion penned by Justice Samuel Alito made official the reversal of the landmark legislation.

The Guttmacher Institute said in the six months since the law was overturned, 24 states have banned abortion or are likely to do so.

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US State Dept. Accidentally Publishes G7 Statement on Ukraine From September

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US State Department accidentally published an old Group of Seven (G7) foreign ministers' statement on Russia's annexation of Ukraine's territory that was originally issued in September and the G7 has already taken it down from its web platform.

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, among others, drew attention to the erroneous release and said in a statement that it notified Japanese media about it.

The joint statement, dubbed "G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Illegal Annexation of Sovereign Ukrainian Territory," was initially published on September 30, 2022.

On that day, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the heads of the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics, as well as Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, signed agreements on the accession of these territories to Russia, after referendums were held that showed an overwhelming majority of the local population supported rejoining Russia.

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US Offsetting Rivals With Resilient Numbers of New Satellites - Space Force Chief

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has been offsetting or "mitigating" the challenge of anti-satellite weapons deployed by rivals such as Russia and China by putting lots of inexpensive, new mini-satellites into orbit, creating back-up resiliency if a few or even larger numbers of them were destroyed, US Space Force chief Gen. B. Chance Saltzman said. "Whoever attacks first in place has an inherent advantage in space," Saltzman told a Center for Strategic and International Studies podcast on Wednesday. "Therefore, [we] establish resilience in space with a constellation of satellites... We have resilience and we mitigate that advantage." Saltzman explained that by putting thousands of mini-satellites that were inexpensive and easy to manufacture and could be launched in large batches, the United States was able to neutralize the effect of new satellite-killing or anti-satellite weapons deployed in orbit by other nations. "My goal is to avoid a conflict or a crisis. ... We are already in a state of comparative endurance [in space] with our adversaries," he said. However, the competition needed to be managed without escalating into conflict, Saltzman added.

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US Has Moved to 'New Era' of Fast Satellite Design, Deployment - Space Force Chief

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has successfully transitioned to "a whole new era" of fast adaptability in space operations owing to its ability to design, manufacture, launch and deploy entire constellations of far smaller satellites within two to three years "from order to orbit," US Space Force Chief of Operations General B. Chance "Salty" Saltzman said.

"We live in a whole new era," Saltzman told a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) podcast on Wednesday. "Two to three years from order to orbit: Those are the concepts [now dominating acquisition and deployment programs]."

The US Space Force was using this new flexibility and the far lower cost of launching large numbers of much smaller satellites into orbit to create back-up and resiliency in its orbiting surveillance and communications architecture so that adversaries could no longer rely on paralyzing US space operations by just knocking out a handful of large and easily detectable satellites, Saltzman said.

"I want to focus on sensors, space awareness ...[and] fusion engines that pull data out of the environment and have high fidelity," Saltzman said.

The United States needed to leverage its network of alliances around the world to position key space sensors on the ground in many countries to give it a major advantage over peer rivals such as Russia and China, Saltzman added.

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Biden on Putin's New START Pullout Says Confident They 'Will Be Able to Work It Out'
(Updates with details in paras 4,5; background in paras 6-9)

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he is confident the United States and Russia will be able to work out issues related to arms control regardless of Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to suspend Russia's participation in the New START treaty. Putin officially announced Moscow was pulling out of its long-running talks with the United States for a New START treaty during his Tuesday address to the Federal Assembly. He also accused the United States of developing new types of nuclear weapons and considering new nuclear weapons tests.

"Not sure what else he [Putin] was able to say in his speech at the moment, but I think it's a mistake and I'm confident we'll be able to work it out," Biden told ABC News in an interview that aired Wednesday.

Biden further said he thinks arms control agreements are very much in both parties' interest and the world's interest.

The US president added that the United States has not seen any change in Russia's nuclear posture or evidence that Putin is thinking of using nuclear weapons or international continental ballistic missiles.

On Wednesday, the Russian parliament's lower and upper houses approved a bill to halt Russia's participation in the New START treaty.

New START, in effect since February 5, 2011, is the last remaining legally binding agreement between the US and Russia — the two countries with the largest nuclear capabilities. Under the treaty, the US and Russia have been required to reduce their nuclear arsenal to a total of 700 missiles, 800 launchers and 1,550 deployed warheads.

In June 2021, Putin and US President Joe Biden signed a joint US-Russia statement on strategic stability, where they pledged to "lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures" through the bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue and reaffirmed the principle that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

Earlier that year, the Biden administration agreed to extend the New START accord to February 5, 2026.

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Russia Still 'Historic and Sophisticated' Power in Space - US Space Operations Chief

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Russia remains a "historic and sophisticated" space power with a broad spectrum of military capabilities to contest the United States in space operations, US Space Operations Command chief Lt. Gen. Stephen Whiting said.

"Russia is a historic and sophisticated space power," Whiting told a National Defense University Foundation audience on Wednesday.

Whiting pointed out that the space domain around earth was now more contested and congested than it had ever been.

"We are tracking 48,000 pieces of space debris, an increase of 90% over the past three years," Whiting said.

Much of the increase was caused by the thousands of communications micro-satellites that were now being launched into low earth orbit while others had been created by anti-satellite weapons tests in recent years, Whiting added.

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US Holds 'Working-Level' Talks With Chinese Military, Nothing at Leader-Level - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has held working-level talks with People's Republic of China (PRC) military officials, but no engagements have occurred among senior leadership, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner said during a press briefing.

"We have had working-level communications between the Defense Department and PRC counterparts, both in Washington and in Beijing, but we have not had leader-level communications despite US requests," Ratner said on Wednesday.

Earlier this month, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said he would continue to encourage open lines of communication between the US and PRC militaries despite high-level engagements halting after the United States shot down an alleged Chinese surveillance balloon. The incident prompted US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to postpone a trip to Beijing to meet with Chinese officials, although the State Department has said it plans to proceed with the visit when conditions allow.

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Biden Says Does Not Think Putin Wants to Use Nukes After Suspending New START Treaty

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in a recent interview that he does not think Russian President Vladimir Putin is thinking of using nuclear weapons soon after suspending Russia's participation in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

Putin announced that Russia was pulling out of its long-running talks with the United States for a New START treaty during his Tuesday address to the Federal Assembly. Putin also accused the United States of developing new types of nuclear weapons and considering new nuclear weapons tests.

"It's a big mistake to do that. Not very responsible. But, I don't read into that that he's thinking of using nuclear weapons or anything like that," Biden told ABC News in an interview that aired on Wednesday.

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Biden on Putin's New START Pullout Says Confident They 'Will Be Able to Work It Out'

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"Not sure what else he [Putin] was able to say in his speech at the moment, but I think it's a mistake and I'm confident we'll be able to work it out," Biden told ABC News in an interview that aired Wednesday.

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China Has Achieved 'Breathtaking' Growth in Space Power - US Space Operations Chief

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - China has achieved "breathtaking" growth in its military space programs over the past 15 years, US Space Operations Command chief Lt. Gen. Stephen Whiting said.

"China's growth in space has truly been breathtaking," Whiting told a National Defense University Foundation audience on Wednesday.

Until 2007, the United States enjoyed virtually uncontested dominance in space after the end of the Cold War, but it has been steadily and increasingly challenged by China and other peer adversaries ever since, Whiting said.

Whiting's boss, Chief of Space Operations and Space Force overall Commander Gen. B. Chance Saltzman said in a January 28 talk with Air and Space Force Association volunteer field leaders that China already had deployed multiple ground-based lasers and numerous jammers targeting wide swaths of Satellite Command frequencies and GPS.

Saltzman said China had also invested in cyber capabilities that are threatening US ground networks.

Beijing had also integrated space into its overall military operations, with 290 ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) satellites, 49 precision-navigation-and-timing satellites, and a growing number of rapid-response launch capabilities, Saltzman added.

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Maryland Community Puts Up Resistance Against Lithium-Ion Battery Storage Unit - Residents

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - A community in the US state of Maryland is coming together to fight an energy company installing a lithium battery storage unit in the area that is close to schools, residents told Sputnik.

Patricia Monroe was unaware until someone told her that PEPCO, a local electricity provider, had begun plans to situate a lithium battery storage unit in her neighborhood.

"Someone I know asked me if I knew what PEPCO was doing and I had no idea. I'm not having it. This is a pilot project that's never been done before. They want to use us as lab rats, guinea pigs for a technology that is untested," Monroe, president of the South Lawn Citizens Association said. "I'm not against alternative forms of energy and I'm not against the battery storage unit but it would be between schools and homes 35 feet away. This proposed substation directly connected to a residential community, less than 100 feet from a daycare and less than one mile away from three schools."

It didn't take long for Monroe to begin doing extensive research on the Livingston Road Battery Energy Storage System and mobilize residents in nearby communities. For about two years, Monroe, community leaders and a band of residents have taken the fight to PEPCO who they argue has pursued a campaign with all the hallmarks of environmental racism.

To that point, said Sharon Lawrence, president of the Livingston Woods Homeowners Association, none of the other suggested locations for lithium battery storage units in Maryland are slated to be placed in a vibrant and active community.

In Montgomery County, for example, residents point out, the place PEPCO chose is a remote location far from where people live.

PEPCO's Livingston Road substation sits in the center of an ethnic and racially diverse cluster of homes, businesses and neighborhoods that are home to a mix of residents who earn a wide range of incomes. Several residents said their concern is piqued by research which indicates that an explosion at the storage facility would likely require a five-mile evacuation radius.

PEPCO's attempt to sidestep residents who live closest to the substation and engage other communities far from the substation angered Monroe and her colleagues. Furious residents sent letters, called, emailed, attended meetings to air their grievances to council members, Maryland state delegates and senators, County Executive Angela Alsobrooks, the Public Service Commission, the MD Department of Parks and Planning and other government agencies.

What's most concerning to people like Herb Boyd, Ron Weiss, Monroe and Lawrence are the toxic fumes a fire would produce. Water alone cannot put out lithium battery fires and firefighters in the neighborhood admitted they are still learning and training how to fight these fires.

The batteries are also very volatile and could be ignited by widely varying temperatures, spontaneous combustion. There are also concerns over the release of hydrogen and nitrogen, manufacturing defects, and design flaws.

Christian Wargo, assistant fire chief with Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department, said there are a number of unknowns.

"We're worried about the release of hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon monoxide, and cyanide," he said. "It depends on the battery. This is so new that codes aren't up to date. It's the 'what if,' because we don't know... how they will react."

Despite residents' valid concerns, PEPCO argues that the Livingston Road Battery Energy Storage Project is "safe and clean" and is an essential part of the company's "broader strategic effort to strengthen and modernize the energy grid serving Maryland and the District of Columbia."

"This effort includes numerous targeted projects in communities across the Pepco region to harden our critical energy infrastructure and build a more resilient grid to prevent those outages that can be prevented," the company said in a statement.

PEPCO Regional President Donna Cooper has said in several meetings that residents in Oxon Hill, Ft. Washington and adjoining communities have nothing to fear from these lithium batteries.

"There are so many unknowns when it comes to lithium-ion batteries," said Patrice Payne of the Livingston Woods Homeowners Association. "There are daycares, a middle school a high school. We done the research which has raised our concerns, but PEPCO has not done due diligence. We've been asking PEPCO for risk-and cost sharing analysis. We ask them to revisit where they're placing the battery storage unit."

Payne said there was no state or local regulations to enforce this project, adding that PEPCO lacked the authority and expertise to evaluate the dangers and risks to the community.

In several meetings with PEPCO representatives, residents expressed their deep concerns about the project, citing studies they've seen, and data and information gathered after consultation with educational specialists like the University of Texas' Dr. Ofodike A. Ezekoye, engineers, fire department officials, attorneys, subject-matter experts and others.

Of great concern is that this is a pilot project with no cache of information and data from which to draw conclusions, no actual pool of information from which to formulate analysis, and too few events and mishaps from which to better understand how these Lithium-Ion batteries will hold up in the winter, through wild temperature swings, storms or other elements of nature.

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Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner Subpoenaed to Testify in Federal January 6 Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka and his son-in-law Jared Kushner have been subpoenaed by a US special counsel to testify before a

federal grand jury regarding Trump's alleged efforts to stay in power after losing the 2020 presidential election, the New York Times reported.

The report said on Wednesday that it is unclear if the former US president will try to block Ivanka Trump or Jared Kushner from testifying on the basis of executive privilege.

An aide for Ivanka Trump and Kushner did not respond for a request for comment, the report said.

The two recently testified before the US House special committee investigating the January 6, 2021 events at the US Capitol, which Donald Trump did not seek to block.

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Russia Urges Voting Against UN Resolution on Ukraine if Amendments Rejected - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - Russia urges all states at the UN General Assembly to vote against the resolution on Ukraine proposed by the Western countries in case the proposed amendments to the resolution are rejected, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said.

"If the amendments are rejected and the document will remain as it is now, one sided and divorced from reality, we urge everyone to vote against the draft resolution," Nebenzia said during a special session on Ukraine at the UN General Assembly on Wednesday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS

* Relations between Russia and China are not aimed against third parties, and will not tolerate foreign interference or threats, Chinese Central Foreign Affairs Office Director Wang Yi said on Wednesday.

* China highly appreciates Russia's readiness to resolve the Ukraine crisis through dialogue and negotiations, Wang Wang said.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Wang Yi discussed the Ukrainian crisis during their meeting in Moscow, and Russia is grateful for China's balanced approach and welcomes Beijing's readiness to play a positive role in resolving the crisis, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said

* Russia is waiting for Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit, which will give further impetus to the development of relations between the two countries, Russian President Vladimir Putin said at a meeting with Wang Yi.

* There is every reason to believe that the volume of trade between Russia and China will reach \$200 billion earlier than in 2024, Putin said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to New York City to attend a UN Security Council ministerial meeting on the anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the State Department said on Wednesday.

* The United Kingdom will not send troops to Ukraine, UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Europe Leo Docherty said.

* Russia provided security guarantees for the visit of US President Joe Biden to Kiev, otherwise it would not have taken place, Konstantin Gavrillov, the head of the Russian delegation at the military security and arms control talks in Vienna, said.

* The Russian forces continue their offensive in the Donetsk direction, Ukraine's forces losses amounted to 250 killed and wounded servicemen and 12 pieces of equipment, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

NEW START TREATY

* The Russian Federation Council unanimously approved at a meeting on Wednesday the bill on the suspension of Russia's participation in the Strategic Offensive Arms Treaty (New START).

* Russia's return to the New START will depend on the position of the West, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* It is important for Russia to do everything for its security and remain patient until opponents are ripe for a normal dialogue, Peskov said, commenting on Moscow's decision to suspend its participation in the New START.

* US Ambassador to Russia Lynne Tracy did not request a meeting with representatives of the Russian Foreign Ministry after Moscow's decision to suspend participation in the New START, no meetings are planned, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

UN DISCUSSION ON NORD STREAM PIPELINES SABOTAGE

* The discussion of the terrorist attack on the Nord Stream gas pipelines in the UN Security Council indicates that Russia has managed to draw attention to the need for a transparent and thorough investigation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

* The voting on Russia's draft resolution calling for an UN-led investigation into the blasts at the Nord Stream pipelines will not take place this week, a UN source told Sputnik.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The European Union failed to agree on the 10th sanctions package against Russia, negotiations on this issue will continue on February 23, Reuters reported on Wednesday, citing four diplomatic sources.

* The International Federation of Journalists has suspended Russia's membership, this is a political decision, they are violating their own charter, Vladimir Solovyov, the head of the Russian Union of Journalists (RUJ), told Sputnik.

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Fed Fears “Significant Risks” From Drawn-Out Process of Raising US Debt Limit

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The drawn-out process in raising the US debt ceiling poses “significant” risks to the country’s financial system and economy, the Federal Reserve said Wednesday in published minutes from its February policy meeting that added to experts voicing fears of a historic debt default.

“A number of participants stressed that a drawn-out period of negotiations to raise the federal debt limit could pose significant risks to the financial system and the broader economy,” the minutes said. “In subsequent months, uncertainties associated with the debt limit could also be important.”

The Fed caution came as a Washington think tank said Wednesday the United States could face an unprecedented default on its payments by early June without the raising of its debt ceiling by Congress, which is controlled by the Republican rivals of President Joe Biden’s Democratic administration.

“Absent congressional action, the debt limit ‘X Date’ — the day when the federal government can no longer meet all its obligations in full and on time —will likely arrive in summer or early fall of 2023,” the Bipartisan Policy Center, or BPC, said in a statement.

The debt limit drama has become a yearly political fight in Congress between the Republicans and Democrats. A drawn-out struggle to raise the nation’s debt ceiling in 2011 triggered a financial crisis that culminated in major credit rating agency Standard & Poor’s stripping the United States of its top triple-A credit status.

BPC said its warning of a potential June default overwrites its earlier prediction that the “extraordinary measures” the US Treasury has resorted to for paying government bills will last until the third quarter of 2023.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen informed Congress in January that the department had found a workaround to the debt default by delaying payment on non-critical obligations. The actions will buy the country time until Congress can pass legislation that will either raise the nation’s \$31.4 trillion borrowing authority or suspend the limit for a period of time.

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Trump Says Hopes Biden Has Funding Leftover for East Palestine After Ukraine Aid

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that he hopes President Joe Biden has enough funds leftover to help residents in East Palestine, Ohio, following a toxic train wreck after giving billions of dollars to Ukraine.

"I sincerely hope that when your representatives and all of the politicians get here, including Biden, they get back from touring Ukraine, that he's got some money leftover because we're now at \$117 billion," Trump said during a speech in East Palestine.

The former US president said he found it strange the Biden administration delayed the deployment of federal assistance, such as deploying the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to East Palestine immediately after the incident took place more than two weeks ago. Despite repeated assurances from state and federal officials that the air and water are safe, residents in the area have told Sputnik of recent health effects, including headaches, burning skin and irritated eyes, as well as anxiety about long-term health risks such as cancer. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources told Sputnik that approximately 3,500 fish had died in waterways near the train derailment site.

On February 3, a train hauling 20 cars with hazardous materials derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. A big fire erupted as a result of the derailment, leading to officials burning vinyl chloride inside five of the tanker cars in order to avoid a catastrophic explosion.

The chemicals inside the five rail cars were diverted and burnt as part of a so-called controlled release, letting off toxic chemicals such as hydrogen chloride and phosgene into the environment.

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State Dept. Says 'Understatement' to Describe Relations With Russia as Heightened Tensions

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - It is an understatement to say that the United States and Russia are in a state of heightened tensions, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday, commenting on Moscow suspending its participation in the last remaining bilateral nuclear weapons pact.

"It is an understatement to say that we are now in a period of heightened tensions between the United States and Russia. But these are issues that matter to the United States. These are issues that matter to Russia. These are issues that matter to people around the world, it is what the rest of the world expects of us as responsible powers--responsible nuclear powers," Price told a briefing.

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US, Russia Unlikely to Restart Nuclear Talks Until Biden Exits White House - Experts

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US and Russia are unlikely to restart nuclear negotiations until the United States gets a new president because the Biden administration is entirely focused on undermining Moscow and continuing the conflict in Ukraine, experts told Sputnik.

Russian President Vladimir Putin officially announced Moscow was pulling out of its long-running talks with the United States for a New START treaty during his Tuesday address to the Federal Assembly. He also accused the United States of developing new types of nuclear weapons and considering new nuclear weapons tests.

"What is the point of negotiating with Washington, and especially with Biden in the White House, when the lie is the rule?" American University in Moscow President Edward Lozansky, a former Soviet nuclear physicist, told Sputnik.

Lozansky said Moscow has little reason to trust Washington amid numerous deceptions, the latest being the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines.

Los Alamos Study Group Co-Founder and Director Greg Mello said Moscow freezing the talks was not surprising when Russian nuclear bases have been attacked, with US help.

"US leaders have made it clear on multiple occasions that the purpose of this war is to defeat Russia, and they have acted accordingly," Mello said. "This is an existential war for Russia, because the West - principally the US - made it one."

Biden could defuse this situation, he added, if he really wanted peace.

"He doesn't want peace and he doesn't care about Ukrainians except as soldiers against Russia," Mello said.

US constitutional historian and political commentator Dan Lazare said Putin clearly does not want to destroy START, but it is hard to see how he can continue negotiating with a country that is actively working towards his overthrow.

The larger significance, he added, is that the international climate deteriorates with each new escalation, but at a certain point the effects will start to snowball as either side casts aside restraint.

"Wars do not promote moderation. Rather, they result in a process of mutual radicalization as either side resorts to tactics that are ever more extreme," Lazare told Sputnik.

While it still might be willing to talk, it is hard to see how progress can advance with relations at such a rancorous level, he added.

"So regardless of who makes the first move, negotiations are grinding to a halt," Lazare warned. Earlier in the day, Biden described Russia's decision as a "big mistake" as the presidents of Romania, Slovakia and Poland greeted him at the Bucharest Nine meeting. This came after Biden earlier in the week delivered a fiery speech in Poland intended to rally NATO to back Ukraine against Russia.

New START, in effect since February 5, 2011, is the last remaining legally binding arms agreement between the United States and Russia - the two countries with the largest nuclear capabilities.

Under the treaty, the United States and Russia have been required to reduce their nuclear arsenal to a total of 700 missiles, 800 launchers, and 1,550 deployed warheads.

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Pentagon Says Russia Notified US About ICBM Test In Advance

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Pentagon spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Wednesday that Russia notified the United States that it would test an intercontinental ballistic missile on Monday during President Joe Biden's visit to Kiev.

On Tuesday, CNN reported, citing two US officials familiar with the matter, that Russia notified the United States in advance of a test launch of its Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) during US President Joe Biden's trip to Ukraine on Monday.

"We've certainly maintained the lines of communication [with Russia]," Singh said during a press briefing. "As you just saw, the White House reached out to Russia to alert them about the President's visit to Kiev. We maintain open lines of communications with the, the ICBM test that was just launched over the weekend by Russia, we were notified through the New START Treaty process."

The Pentagon welcomes communication with Russia, Singh added.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday, commenting on reports about a recent unsuccessful test launch of a ballistic missile allegedly conducted by Russia, that the matter falls within the competence of the Russian Defense Ministry.

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UN Chief Says Implicit Threats to Use Nuclear Weapons 'Utterly Unacceptable'

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday there have been implicit threats on the potential use of nuclear weapons but emphasized that they are "utterly unacceptable."

"Meanwhile, we have heard implicit threats to use nuclear weapons," Guterres told a UN General Assembly emergency special session on Ukraine, adding that such threats are "utterly unacceptable."

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UN Chief Says Peace Prospects Between Russia, Ukraine 'Look Bleak Today'

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that the peace prospects between Ukraine and Russia "look bleak" at present.

"Ukrainians, Russians and people far beyond need peace. While prospects may look bleak today, we know that genuine, lasting peace must be based on the UN Charter and international law," Guterres told a UN General Assembly emergency special session on Ukraine.

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Guterres Says Parties to Ukraine Conflict Must Continue, Expand POW Exchanges

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - Ukraine and Russia should expand exchanges of prisoners of war, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.

"Notwithstanding deep mistrust, the parties to the conflict have also worked out regular exchanges of prisoners of war, facilitated by regional actors. These efforts can and must continue, and expand as much as possible," Guterres told the UN General Assembly's emergency special session on Ukraine.

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Grain Deal Shows Russia, Ukraine Can Jointly Advance Global Food Security - UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - The UN-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative has shown that Russia and Ukraine can together advance global food security, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.

"The Black Sea Grain Initiative has shown the possibility of Ukraine and Russia to advance global food security - with the support of the government of Turkey and the United Nations," Guterres told a UN General Assembly emergency special session on Ukraine.

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US Not Adjusting Nuclear Posture Following Russian Suspension of New START - Pentagon
WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The United States will not change its nuclear force posture in the wake of Russia's decision to suspend participation in the New START treaty, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Wednesday.

"No changes in terms of our posture. Nothing is changing in terms of the obligations that we are set to meet," Singh said during a press briefing.

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the suspension during a state-of-the-nation speech earlier this week. US President Joe Biden on Wednesday called the decision a "big mistake" by Russia.

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Belarus Suggests Amending West-Sponsored UNGA Resolution on Ukraine - Source to Sputnik

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - The Belarus mission to the United Nations has suggested two amendments to the Western-drafted resolution on Ukraine to condemn the irresponsible actions of certain Normandy Contact Group leaders and to call on countries to stop supplying weapons to Ukraine, a United Nations source told Sputnik.

The text of the first amendment to the resolution states it "Strongly condemns statements made by certain leaders of the Normandy Contact Group regarding their true intentions when devising the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements which were inconsistent with the aim of peaceful resolution of the conflict in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine."

The second amendment to the resolution concerns weapons supplies to Ukraine and "calls on member states to refrain from sending weapons to the zone of conflict."

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No Vote on Russian-Drafted UNSC Resolution on Nord Stream Probe This Week - Source

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - The voting on Russia's draft resolution calling for an UN-led investigation into the blasts at the Nord Stream pipelines will not take place this week, a UN source told Sputnik.

"Voting on the resolution is not planned for this week. The work on the text is underway," the source said.

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US Lawmaker Proposes Amendment Requiring POTUS, VP Prove Cognitive Competency - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 21 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Scott DesJarlais is proposing a constitutional amendment requiring the president and vice president prove their cognitive competency to serve in office, the lawmaker's office told Sputnik on Tuesday.

DesJarlais, a former family medicine practitioner, introduced the bill to amend the US Constitution earlier in the day, Communications Director Alex Swisher said in a statement.

"This should be a nonpartisan issue. The American people deserve to know that the top two officials in charge of the safety and security of our country are mentally competent," DesJarlais is quoted as saying.

The 25th Amendment of the US Constitution currently allows the president to voluntarily transfer his powers to the vice president. The amendment also permits the vice president, alongside a majority of the presidential cabinet, to declare a president unable to discharge their duties.

New constitutional amendments must either pass both chambers of Congress with a two-thirds majority or be proposed at a national convention convened at the request of two-thirds of state

legislatures. Proposed amendments must then be ratified by three-quarters of states prior to adoption.

DesJarlais is working with other members of the House Republican Doctors Caucus on legislation detailing which tests will be used to judge cognitive competency, Swisher said. Testing would need to be administered by a nonpartisan commission to avoid political targeting, Swisher said.

Proof of mental competency would be required at the candidacy stage, Swisher added.

The legislation comes as US President Joe Biden, 80, weighs a 2024 reelection bid. If Biden were to win a second term, he would turn 86 before completing his time in office.

Earlier this month, former White House physician Ronny Jackson accused the Biden administration of concealing reports on the president's mental fitness. A recent medical report on Biden made no mention of a cognitive test, although it characterized him as a "healthy, vigorous" man.

The legislation does not target any specific candidate and requires proof of competency from candidates of all political parties, Swisher said. Concerns about the mental competency of elected officials have been raised by both Republicans and Democrats, Swisher noted.

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Biden Should Fly to Moscow Now if He Wanted to End Nuke Crisis - Nobel Peace Group Founder

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden if he had any insight into the severity of the nuclear crisis would immediately fly to Moscow to engage in talks to end it, founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility, Dr. Helen Caldicott, told Sputnik.

Russian President Vladimir Putin officially announced Russia was pulling out of its long-running talks with the United States for a new START treaty during his Tuesday address to the Federal Assembly. He also accused the United States of developing new types of nuclear weapons and considering new nuclear weapons tests.

"If Biden had any insight into this terminal diagnosis he would fly to Moscow and negotiate an end to this nuclear madness," Caldicott said. "Instead, the relevant politicians operate from a testosterone-fueled imperative much the same way as they did during the first and second world wars."

Caldicott also said no one involved in this bi-continental "nuclear mess" seems to contemplate or even understand that they are playing blind man's bluff with humanity's common future.

Putin's two-year suspension of the START talks "bodes extremely ill for the future of planetary life," she added.

However, pushed into a corner by the US and NATO, Putin has really no other way to respond but to use his nuclear arsenal as a counterpoint to the consistent arming of the Ukraine and drone attacks on his nuclear air bases, Caldicott said.

Caldicott warned of misunderstandings and confusion at this time of high international tension with nuclear launch mechanisms on a higher state of alert.

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Biden, Nuland Leading US Into Nuclear Armageddon - Ex-FBI Official

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and senior White House and State Department officials are leading the United States and the world into nuclear annihilation, former FBI Special Agent Coleen Rowley told Sputnik.

Russian President Vladimir Putin officially announced Moscow was pulling out of its long-running talks with the United States for a new START treaty during his Tuesday address to the Federal Assembly. He also accused the United States of developing new types of nuclear weapons and considering new nuclear weapons tests.

"The neocons' hell-bent plans for 'full spectrum dominance' have been a long time in the making, having even been publicly announced decades ago, but now... we've truly reached the eve of destruction," Rowley, a Time magazine Whistleblower of the Year, said.

In addition to Biden, senior State Department official Victoria Nuland, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and White House security aide Jake Sullivan, are leading oblivious Americans right into "nuclear Armageddon," Rowley added.

The United States was far closer to catastrophic global war than the American people realized, Rowley said.

"The situation is just so 11th hour and 59 minutes' bad," she warned.

Earlier in the day, Biden described Russia's decision as a "big mistake" as the presidents of Romania, Slovakia and Poland greeted him at the Bucharest Nine meeting. This came after Biden earlier in the week delivered a fiery speech in Poland intended to rally NATO to back Ukraine against Russia.

New START, in effect since February 5, 2011, is the last remaining legally binding arms agreement between the United States and Russia - the two countries with the largest nuclear capabilities.

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US Kills 7 al-Shabab Militants in Somalia - AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – US military eliminated seven al-Shabab militants in an airstrike in Somalia, the Africa Command (AFRICOM) said on Wednesday.

"The strike occurred in a remote area near Galmudug, Somalia which is approximately 510 km northeast of Mogadishu. The initial assessment is the strike killed 7 al-Shabaab fighters," the statement read.

The strike was carried out on February 21 at the request of the government of Somalia, it added.

US military assesses that no civilians were injured or killed.

Al-Shabab is linked to the al-Qaeda terrorist group (banned in Russia). The former has long engaged in an insurgency campaign against the Somalian federal government and staged numerous terror attacks.

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US Nuclear Security Laboratory Says Fire Broke Out at Facility, Situation Under Control

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - A fire broke out and was contained by personnel at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Tennessee, which engages in nuclear science for national security purposes, the complex said on Wednesday.

"At approximately 9:15 a.m., one of the Y-12 production buildings had a fire in a hood," the complex said in a statement. "Personnel have determined the event is contained to the production building."

All evacuated personnel are accounted for and no injuries or contaminations have been reported, the statement said.

There are no off-site impacts from the incident, the complex also said.

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Biden, Nuland Leading US Into Nuclear Armageddon - Ex-FBI Official

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and senior White House and State Department officials are leading the United States and the world into nuclear annihilation, former FBI Special Agent Coleen Rowley told Sputnik.

Russian President Vladimir Putin officially announced Moscow was pulling out of its long-running talks with the United States for a new START treaty during his Tuesday address to the Federal Assembly. He also accused the United States of developing new types of nuclear weapons and considering new nuclear weapons tests.

"The neocons' hell-bent plans for 'full spectrum dominance' have been a long time in the making, having even been publicly announced decades ago, but now... we've truly reached the eve of destruction," Rowley, a Time magazine Whistleblower of the Year, said.

In addition to Biden, senior State Department official Victoria Nuland, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and White House security aide Jake Sullivan, are leading oblivious Americans right into "nuclear Armageddon," Rowley added.

The United States was far closer to catastrophic global war than the American people realized, Rowley said.

"The situation is just so 11th hour and 59 minutes' bad," she warned.

Earlier in the day, Biden described Russia's decision as a "big mistake" as the presidents of Romania, Slovakia and Poland greeted him at the Bucharest Nine meeting. This came after Biden earlier in the week delivered a fiery speech in Poland intended to rally NATO to back Ukraine against Russia.

New START, in effect since February 5, 2011, is the last remaining legally binding arms agreement between the United States and Russia - the two countries with the largest nuclear capabilities.

Under the treaty, the United States and Russia have been required to reduce their nuclear arsenal to a total of 700 missiles, 800 launchers, and 1,550 deployed warheads.

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Trump During Trip to East Palestine Says 'Terrible' Biden Hasn't Visited After Train Wreck

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump during a visit to East Palestine, Ohio, on Wednesday to inspect recovery efforts following a toxic train wreck said it is terrible President Joe Biden has not yet decided to visit the small town.

"I think it's terrible," Trump said when asked about Biden not visiting East Palestine.

Trump was greeted by dozens of enthusiastic residents in the town of nearly 5,000 people. The crowd cheered "Trump," "USA" and "Let's go Brandon" during one of Trump's stops in town. Trump told residents that if he was president he would have immediately deployed the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to East Palestine to help with recovery efforts following the train derailment that led to the release of toxic chemicals into the surrounding environment.

The Biden administration announced on Friday, roughly two weeks after the incident, that FEMA would deploy to East Palestine.

Trump also assured the crowd of residents that a lot of progress was being made to address the situation.

Despite repeated assurances from state and federal officials that the air and water are safe, residents in the area have told Sputnik of recent health effects, including headaches, burning skin and irritated eyes, as well as anxiety about long-term health risks such as cancer.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources told Sputnik that approximately 3,500 fish had died in waterways near the train derailment site.

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Impending US Winter Storm Already Affecting Air Travel - Reports

Washington, February 22 (Sputnik) - A winter storm that is expected to hit a large swaths of the United States by Friday has already caused delays and assorted problems for travelers, CBS News reported on Wednesday.

More than 2,200 flights have been delayed and canceled at airports across the United States on Wednesday morning as the coast-to-coast winter storm affected most of the northern half of the country continued to track east from Washington toward New England, the report said.

The delays come after several days of reports of widespread disruptions to air travel, which has led airlines to issue weather waivers in anticipation of further scheduling issues, the report said. Officials have issued weather alerts for 29 US states, directly affecting about 75 million people, the report said.

Officials in Minneapolis, Minnesota, have declared a snow emergency given that the city is already under 6 inches of snow, the report added

The officials have said they expect double-digit snowfall as well as strong wind gusts which will hammer significant portions of the Midwest, according to the report.

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Biden Attends Ash Wednesday Mass in Poland, Prays for Peace - White House

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden attended a Catholic Mass marking Ash Wednesday during his visit to Poland, during which he prayed for peace, the White House said on Wednesday.

Biden celebrated Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent in some branches of Christianity, alongside Polish priest Wieslaw Dawidowski, the White House said in a pool report. "I had the honor today of placing ashes on the forehead of the US President Mr. Joe Biden.

Everything took place in great secrecy, but now I can speak: in an improvised chapel, next to the President's apartment. We prayed for peace, the conversion of Russia and the light of the Holy Spirit for Mr. President," Dawidowski said in a statement, as quoted by the White House.

Observers of Ash Wednesday often receive ash marked in a cross on their forehead, tied to the biblical notion that man both comes from and returns to dust.

Even the "most powerful" people in the world take ashes if they belong to the Catholic tradition, Dawidowski said.

Dawidowski is an Augustinian, doctor of theology and publicist, the White House said.

Biden has since departed Poland, where he met with NATO eastern flank allies and delivered a speech on continued US support for Ukraine on the eve of the one-year anniversary of Russia's special military operation.

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Biden Should Fly to Moscow Now if He Wanted to End Nuke Crisis - Nobel Peace Group Founder

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden if he had any insight into the severity of the nuclear crisis would immediately fly to Moscow to engage in talks to end it, founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility, Dr. Helen Caldicott, told Sputnik.

Russian President Vladimir Putin officially announced Russia was pulling out of its long-running talks with the United States for a new START treaty during his Tuesday address to the Federal Assembly. He also accused the United States of developing new types of nuclear weapons and considering new nuclear weapons tests.

"If Biden had any insight into this terminal diagnosis he would fly to Moscow and negotiate an end to this nuclear madness," Caldicott said. "Instead, the relevant politicians operate from a testosterone-fueled imperative much the same way as they did during the first and second world wars."

Caldicott also said no one involved in this bi-continental "nuclear mess" seems to contemplate or even understand that they are playing blind man's bluff with humanity's common future. Putin's two-year suspension of the START talks "bodes extremely ill for the future of planetary life," she added.

However, pushed into a corner by the US and NATO, Putin has really no other way to respond but to use his nuclear arsenal as a counterpoint to the consistent arming of the Ukraine and drone attacks on his nuclear air bases, Caldicott said.

Caldicott warned of misunderstandings and confusion at this time of high international tension with nuclear launch mechanisms on a higher state of alert.

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Belarus Suggests Amending West-Sponsored UNGA Resolution on Ukraine - Source to Sputnik

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - The Belarus mission to the United Nations has suggested two amendments to the Western-drafted resolution on Ukraine to condemn the irresponsible actions of certain Normandy Contact Group leaders and to call on countries to stop supplying weapons to Ukraine, a United Nations source told Sputnik.

The text of the first amendment to the resolution states it "Strongly condemns statements made by certain leaders of the Normandy Contact Group regarding their true intentions when devising the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements which were inconsistent with the aim of peaceful resolution of the conflict in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine."

The second amendment to the resolution concerns weapons supplies to Ukraine and "calls on member states to refrain from sending weapons to the zone of conflict."

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US Could Default on Debt by Early June if Debt Ceiling Not Raised - Think Tank

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The United States could face an unprecedented default on its payments by early June without the raising of its debt ceiling by Congress, which is controlled by the Republican rivals of President Joe Biden's Democratic administration, the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) think tank said on Wednesday.

"Absent congressional action, the debt limit 'X Date' - the day when the federal government can no longer meet all its obligations in full and on time - will likely arrive in summer or early fall of 2023," the BPC said in a statement.

Referring to an analysis by its Economic Policy Director Shai Akabas, the BPC said the latest forecast overwrites its earlier prediction that the "extraordinary measures" the US Treasury Department has resorted to for paying government bills will last until the third quarter of 2023. "Policymakers have an opportunity now to inject certainty into the US and global economy by beginning, in earnest, bipartisan negotiations around our nation's fiscal health and taking action to uphold the full faith and credit of the United States well before the X-Date," Akabas said in the statement.

The debt limit drama has become a yearly political fight in Congress between the two parties. A drawn-out struggle to raise the nation's debt ceiling in 2011 triggered a financial crisis that culminated in major credit rating agency Standard & Poor's stripping the United States of its top triple-A credit status.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen informed Congress in January that the department had found a workaround to the debt default by delaying payment on non-critical obligations. The actions will buy the country time until Congress can pass legislation that will either raise the nation's \$31.4 trillion borrowing authority or suspend the limit for a period of time.

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Biden Admin. Makes Bigger Push for Green Energy With First Offshore Wind-Lease Sale

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is making a stronger push to promote its green energy agenda with a historic offshore sale of a wind-lease from the US portion of the Gulf Coast of Mexico, the White House announced in a statement on Wednesday. "These actions, which include proposing the first-ever Gulf of Mexico offshore wind lease sale, are advancing President Biden's clean energy and economic agenda," the statement said.

The initiatives will boost employment and revitalize US manufacturing and innovation to deliver "reliable, affordable power to homes and businesses, while saving families money and strengthening energy security," the statement said.

After the maiden lease for the Gulf of Mexico, there will be two other block leases sold for offshore Texas and Louisiana, the statement said.

"These areas have the potential to generate enough clean energy to power almost 1.3 million homes," the statement said. "The President has also set bold goals of deploying 30 gigawatts (GW) of offshore wind by 2030, as well as 15 GW specifically of floating offshore wind by 2035." Since taking office in January 2021, Biden has overseen the approval of \$9.8 billion in wind-energy related investments last year alone, more than triple the previous year, the statement added.

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Elon Musk Says Nobody 'Pushing' Ukraine Conflict More Than US Diplomat Victoria Nuland

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Nobody is pushing for conflict in Ukraine harder than US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, Twitter CEO Elon Musk said on Wednesday.

"Nobody is pushing this war more than Nuland," Musk said via Twitter.

Musk's statement came in response to a US media report covering Russia's reaction to recent comments by Nuland in support of strikes on Crimea. Nuland's support for strikes on Crimea confirm the United States' intimate involvement in the Ukraine conflict, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

On Tuesday, former US President Donald Trump also criticized Nuland by name for her role in promoting conflict, claiming she and other US officials are "obsessed" with pushing Ukraine into NATO.

Victoria Nuland has served in positions across the US government, including NATO Ambassador, State Department Spokesperson and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs.

In 2014, a leaked conversation purportedly between Nuland and then-US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt revealed that the US officials were discussing who they would like to see take power in Ukraine among opposition leaders.

In January 2022, Nuland said Nord Stream 2 would "not move forward" if Russia launched an operation in Ukraine, foreshadowing the US's responsibility for the attack revealed by journalist Seymour Hersh earlier this month.

In December, Nuland said that the Biden administration is gratified to know the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is a "hunk of metal" at the bottom of the sea.

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US Transportation Secretary to Visit East Palestine in Light of Train Derailment Incident

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg will visit East Palestine, Ohio, on Thursday to meet with residents affected by the Norfolk Southern train derailment, which resulted in the release of toxic chemicals in the environment, and to receive an update on a federal investigation into the incident, the US Department of Transportation said on Wednesday.

"Tomorrow, Thursday, February 23, US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg will travel to East Palestine, Ohio, to meet with community members affected by the Norfolk Southern hazardous train derailment," the Transportation Department said in a press release.

Buttigieg will also receive an update on the ongoing investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board, which is expected to issue its initial findings on Thursday as well, the release said.

Buttigieg will be joined by Federal Railroad Administration Administrator Amit Bose and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration Deputy Administrator Tristan Brown, the release added.

Former President Donald Trump is expected to visit East Palestine and talk with the locals on Wednesday.

Despite repeated assurances that the air and water are safe, residents in the area have told Sputnik of recent health effects, including headaches, burning skin and irritated eyes, as well as anxiety about long-term health risks such as cancer.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources told Sputnik that approximately 3,500 fish had died in waterways near the train derailment site.

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Tech Company 'Meta' Plans to Cut Thousands of Jobs in Organization Reform - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US tech company Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) plans to cut thousands of jobs as part of an effort to reform the organization's structure, the Washington Post reported on Wednesday.

Meta, which owns the Facebook and Instagram platforms, is preparing to reorganize and downsize the company in a move that could impact thousands of workers, the report said.

The company also plans to downgrade some leaders into lower-level positions to flatten the organizational hierarchy, the report said. Some Meta employees expect those whose jobs get converted to eventually quit, further trimming the company's workforce, the report added.

Cuts to projects and divisions across the company's global workforce could happen over the course of months, not in a single action, the report said.

In November, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced the layoff of more than 11,000 workers in an effort to make the company more "capital efficient," shifting focus to areas such as artificial intelligence and advertising.

At the time, Zuckerberg told employees the move would minimize the chance of broad layoffs for the "foreseeable future," the report said, citing a recording of a companywide meeting. The report comes following a series of other major layoffs in the tech industry, including by Google, Amazon and Microsoft.

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US Assesses China Has Not Yet Decided to Provide Lethal Aid to Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The United States assesses that China has not yet made a decision to provide lethal aid to Russia for use in Ukraine, US State Department counsel Derrek Chollet said in an interview that aired on Wednesday.

"Our assessment is they have not yet made that decision up to this point," Chollet told CBS News. "But there are just increasing indications that this is something on their minds."

Chollet warned that such a decision by Beijing to help Russia in Ukraine would make life more difficult for China as well.

Despite several sensitive issues between the United States and China, such as the Chinese surveillance balloon that flew over the US mainland, Washington still believes both countries must address matters important to the bilateral relationship and global security, Chollet said. On Sunday, US State Secretary Antony Blinken said that China has mulled the possibility of providing "lethal" military assistance to Russia, including either weapons or ammunition. Until now, he said, private Chinese companies have provided Russia with only "non-lethal" support. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that it is the United States, not China, who is pumping the Ukraine conflict with arms.

Earlier on Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Beijing has resolutely denied allegations about China's plans to help Russia with the supply of weapons and there is nothing to add to the matter.

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Absence of New START Treaty May Lead to New Arms Race - Eurasia Center Vice President

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The absence of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in the current political situation may lead to a new arms race, Washington-based Eurasia Center Executive Vice President Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik.

"This may also lead to a new arms race with both, the United States and Russia, seeking to modernize and increase their nuclear positions," Rasmussen said.

However, Rasmussen pointed out that Russia chose only to suspend its participation in the treaty, but not to withdraw from it.

On Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia was suspending participation in the New START but was not withdrawing from the treaty. Putin noted that before returning to any discussions on the accord, "we must understand for ourselves what countries such as France and the UK still claim, and how we will take into account their strategic arsenals, that is, the combined strike potential of the [NATO] alliance."

Rasmussen pointed out that Putin mentioned in his remarks the unilateral abandonment by the United States from numerous arms treaties and that the Russian president mentioned nuclear deterrence and specifically referred to inspections of facilities that fall under the New START. "He [Putin] mentioned how the West has used treaties often to their own advantage. More recently the United States has called upon Russia to come back into compliance and allow inspection of Russian strategic nuclear locations yet at the same time they refuse Russia from inspecting theirs. This is truly an absurd expectation by the United States and NATO," Rasmussen said.

The current situation brings a cloud over the last remaining nuclear strategic agreement and moves the world even closer to a tipping point, he said.

"This potential could blind the US and its allies, [who] essentially unilaterally destroyed the foundation of arms control and abandoned numerous other agreements," Rasmussen said. Moreover, Rasmussen accused the United States and NATO of ignoring Russia's security concerns, as well as the security of Europe.

"It is the United States and NATO that have for years been irresponsible and have torn up the agreements which provided peace and stability for both Europe and the world. It is the actions of the United States and NATO that have been irresponsible and should be reconsidered," he said.

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US House Oversight Panel Requests Info on Ukraine Funding to Audit for Abuse - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee is requesting information from across the federal government on the billions of taxpayer dollars sent to Ukraine to audit the funding for fraud and abuse, the panel said on Wednesday.

"The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is conducting oversight of the federal government's administration of US taxpayer-funded assistance to Ukraine," the committee said in a letter. "The Committee seeks documents and information to understand how the Department of Defense, Department of State, and the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) are conducting oversight of these funds."

The lawmakers sent the letter to US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and USAID Administrator Samantha Powers.

Congress has provided more than \$113 billion in funding for Ukraine since the launch of Russia's special military operation last year. It is critical that agencies administering the funds ensure they are used for their intended purpose to prevent and reduce the risk of waste, fraud and abuse, the letter said.

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China Seeks to 'Dethrone' US Economically, Not Militarily – US Energy Adviser

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) – China is not necessarily going to beat the United States on the battlefield, but will rather try to “dethrone” it economically, US Senior Adviser for Energy Security Amos Hochstein said on Wednesday.

“I don't believe that China necessarily is going to try to beat the United States on the battlefield as much as it seeks to dethrone the United States on the economic field,” Hochstein said during a discussion at the United States Institute of Peace.

Hochstein believes that US foreign and national security policies should cease to be based on the military to project its power across the world and instead should be based on economics, as it matters far more today than military power.

Earlier in February, US President Joe Biden said that he was committed to working with China where it advanced US interests but would act if Beijing threatened US sovereignty. The president also noted that winning the competition with China should unite all Americans.

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No Vote on Russian-Drafted UNSC Resolution on Nord Stream Probe This Week - Source

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) - The voting on Russia's draft resolution calling for an UN-led investigation into the blasts at the Nord Stream pipelines will not take place this week, a UN source told Sputnik.

"Voting on the resolution is not planned for this week. The work on the text is underway," the source said.

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Israel-Lebanon Maritime Deal Paves Way for Land Border Negotiations - US Energy Adviser

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The maritime border agreement between Israel and Lebanon is paving the way for negotiations on establishing a land border, US Senior Adviser for Infrastructure and Energy Security Amos Hochstein said on Wednesday.

"I believe it does," Hochstein said during a discussion at the United States Institute of Peace when asked whether the Israeli-Lebanese maritime deal paves the way to a land border negotiations.

At the same time, Hochstein said he believes the conditions on the ground in Lebanon are not conducive for negotiations on a land border since there is no permanent government in the country.

With respect to Israel, Hochstein said the newly established government there is preoccupied at present with other issues.

On October 11, 2022, Lebanon and Israel reached a deal on a US-mediated draft agreement on the demarcation of the maritime border, thus ending a decades-old dispute. The deal has opened the way for offshore oil and gas exploration.

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Almost 50% of Americans Say Do Not Trust US Government on Chinese Balloon Issue - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Almost half of Americans do not believe that the US government will reveal the truth about the recent incident with the Chinese balloon over US air space, a new Newsweek poll revealed on Wednesday.

Some 49% of Americans expressed concerns that the US authorities are lying them about the balloon, the poll said.

Fifty-three percent of respondents said they are confident China sent the balloon for the purpose of spying and almost two thirds, or 64% supported the United States' and Canada's decision to shoot down this and other balloons, the poll said.

About 55% of respondents expressed concern about the three additional balloons the US military shot down after shooting the first one and almost half of the respondents said they were sure the additional balloons were launched from China as well.

On the other hand, 13% of respondents said they are not concerned at all about the presence of such flying objects in US air space as compared to the 60% who said they are extremely or somehow concerned, the poll added.

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US Sanctions 6 Mexican Nationals, 6 Entities for Ties to Cartel Drug Operations - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is sanctioning six Mexican nationals and six Mexico-based entities for ties to the Sinaloa Cartel and its drug trade operations, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"Led by brothers Ludim Zamudio Lerma and Luis Alfonso Zamudio Lerma, this network is responsible for diverting illicit precursor chemicals directly into the hands of Sinaloa Cartel members and laboratory operators, further bolstering the Sinaloa Cartel's role as the preeminent facilitator of illicit fentanyl and other deadly drugs being trafficked into the United States," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The precursor chemicals provided by the network to the cartel are used in "super labs" that produce 10 or more pounds of an illicit narcotic per production cycle, the statement said. The sanctioned individuals were designated for having engaged in, or attempted to engage in, activities that contributed to the international proliferation of illicit drugs or their means of production, the statement said.

The action is part of a whole-of-government effort by the US to counter the global threat posed by drug trafficking, which causes tens of thousands of deaths in the US every year, the statement said.

The US will continue to target and pursue accountability for foreign illicit drug actors, the statement added.

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UN Chief Says All Israeli Settlements Are 'Illegal', They 'Must Stop'

UNITED NATIONS, February 22 (Sputnik) -The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that Israeli-built settlements are 'illegal' and they 'must stop'.

"All settlement activity is illegal under international law. And it must stop.

"At the same time, incitement to violence is a dead end. Nothing justifies terrorism. It must be rejected by all," Guterres told the UN members.

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Former US Vice President Pence Says Considering Running for President in 2024

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Former US Vice President Mike Pence said in an interview with Fox News that he is considering running for president in 2024, potentially placing him in a matchup against running mate Donald Trump for the Republican Party nomination.

"We are thinking about it. [My wife] and I have made no decision yet, but we're getting a lot of encouragement from around the country," Pence said on Tuesday, when asked whether he has made a decision about a 2024 run.

In December, Pence spokesman Devin O'Malley denied US media reports that the former vice president filed paperwork to run for president in 2024. A month earlier, Trump had announced his own 2024 re-election bid.

Current US President Joe Biden has yet to announce his 2024 candidacy.

Trump maintains 43% support among the field of potential Republican candidates, while Pence garners just 7%, according to a recent Reuters/Ipsos poll.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who has also not formally announced his candidacy, received 31% support and former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley received 4%, the poll found.

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Russia to Participate in APEC Senior Officials' Meeting in California – US Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - A senior Russian official will participate in an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in California next week, US Senior Official for APEC Matt Murray said on Wednesday.

"Right now, in Palm Springs, there are Russian delegates that are participating in the various meetings there, and we will have an alternate senior official coming for the senior officials meeting next week," Murray told reporters.

Russia also participated in an informal senior officials meeting in Honolulu in December, he noted.

"They elected to participate virtually, but they did participate in the plenary meeting and a symposium that we have held in Honolulu," Murray said.

Murray declined to comment on Russia's possible participation in the APEC leaders' summit in San Francisco in November 2023.

"I would refer you to the White House for that particular question," the official said.

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Trump Says Kim Jong Un Unhappy, Threatened by US-South Korea Air Exercises

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is unhappy and feels threatened by the US-South Korea joint military training and air exercises.

"Kim Jung Un of North Korea, who I got to know and got along with very well during my years as president, is not happy with the US and South Korea doing big training and air exercises together. He feels threatened," Trump said via the social media platform Truth Social.

The former president emphasized that the 35,000 US troops stationed in South Korea are in jeopardy because of the joint exercises, which he characterized as being "ridiculous."

Trump noted he constantly complained during his tenure as president that the joint exercises were "extremely expensive and provocative" and South Korea covered only a small portion of the cost.

In addition, Trump lamented the Biden administration's decision to scrap a deal he had made with South Korea to pay billions of dollars to the United States in a cost-sharing arrangement for the US military's presence in the country.

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Republican Congressman Introduces Resolution to Withdraw US Troops From Syria

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - Florida Congressman Matt Gaetz introduced a War Powers Resolution calling for President Joe Biden to remove US troops from Syria, his office said on Wednesday.

"Rep. Gaetz, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, filed the War Powers Resolution on Tuesday following a February 17th press release from U.S. Central Command, which announced four US servicemembers were wounded during a partnered US and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) helicopter raid in northeastern Syria, ultimately killing a senior ISIS [a terrorist group, banned in Russia] leader," the release stated.

The House of Representatives is required to vote on War Powers Resolutions within 18 days of their introduction.

Gaetz argued that Congress, which has the sole power to declare war, has "never authorized the use of military force in Syria."